

Bearing Fruit
John 15:1-8
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I don't mind being called names. When you grow up with a name like "Kory," you get used to it. Trust me, I've heard it all. And I can even tolerate it when my favorite book calls me names. In the Bible, the followers of Jesus are called disciples (that's pretty good), sheep (a bit smelly, but I get the metaphor) and sinners (that one is true, but a little blunt). I can handle being called all those names.

But I don't like being called a branch. In John 15 Jesus says, "I am the vine and you are the branches." Hmph. I know sticks and stones can break my bones and words can never hurt me, but what about when the word I'm being called IS a stick? I don't like being referred to as a branch because I've had some run-ins with these things. I've almost had my eye put out twice by a branch, and I'm accosted by branches every time I mow our backyard. We have a willow tree back there with long, droopy branches and mowing the grass underneath it is like going through a carwash.

So you see, I don't get along with branches very well, which posed a challenge for me when Jesus compares us with branches of a grapevine. God is the gardener, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches of the vine. It helps understand how this agricultural phenomenon works. As a vine grows, the branches that extend from it produce both fruit, like grapes, and flowers and leaves. And the more the branches produce the flowers and leaves, the less energy they have to produce the fruit. If the gardener wants a plant to look green and pretty, he lets it grow unencumbered. But if the gardener wants the branch to produce fruit, he prunes it back to where the fruit is growing, so that all the energies of the plant are focused on producing the fruit, not wasted on the rest of the branch. A branch may look good because it has a lot of leaves and greenery, because that suggests a healthy vine. But it's all style and no substance; it's all plant and no fruit.

In this passage, Jesus is warning us branches about not producing fruit. We all know other people who fit this mold, people who are interested in looking good and being seen but who don't produce any fruit. And we know we're not like that, right? But our lives sometimes tell a different story. We get caught up in the busyness of life, running around like crazy, juggling so many appointments and responsibilities. And it feels good to be seen as busy, right? No one likes to be thought of as lazy or unmotivated. I got caught up in this mindset while planning for my sabbatical. A sabbatical is supposed to be a time of rest, but I felt guilty resting for three months. What would people think of me? So I built in some activity so that my sabbatical would be "purposeful." But the question Jesus would ask us is this: Is all the effort producing any fruit?

Well, to answer that question, we need to define what fruit is. Paul tells us in Galatians that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. So another way to ask that question is, "Do the choices we make in our lives produce those things in us, or keep them from growing? Do the things we do to keep busy give us more joy or less? Do they make us more patient? More gentle? More faithful to God and church? More loving?"

The church is not an exclusive community but an inclusive one, so we have to turn that question out. Bearing good fruit not only means what's happening inside of us,

but how that growth affects those outside of us. In other words, to bear good fruit means to live lives that help other people see that they are also branches of the True Vine. Bearing fruit means helping other people come to know the love of Christ through our behaviors and actions toward them. We are the channels, the conduits, the seeds that give life to their faith. And the more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and in control we are around them, the more they see the fruits of Christ in us, and the more the desire to be fruitful as well, to be grafted onto the life-giving vine we know as Jesus Christ. People watch us to see what kind of fruit we're producing.

But that's a lot of responsibility, isn't it? It's easy for me to stand here and say, "Go be more patient...right now! All your unbelieving friends are going to get thrown in the eternal fire and burned if you're not more peaceful!" But you'll be glad to know that it's not all up to you. That's another reason why this vineyard imagery works. In a vine, the branches are so intertwined they are almost completely indistinguishable from one another. It is impossible to tell where one branch stops and another starts; all of them run together as they grow from the central vine. The fruitfulness of each individual branch depends on the other branches and its relationship to the vine.

So to bear fruit is a corporate act, not an individual one. To God, all the branches are the same. There is no status or hierarchy; there's no pastor branch or elder branch or committee chairperson branch that's more important than the others. The only way to tell the branches apart is by the fruit they produce. Jesus says, "A good tree produces good fruit and a bad tree produces bad fruit."

To God, we are all created the same. There's no status, no hierarchy in God's kingdom. We all come from the same source and are all connected to the same vine, Jesus Christ. The only thing that distinguishes us is the fruit we produce. This is not about unfruitful times in our past. This is about right now. What kind of fruit are you producing? Is it Grade-A, top of the line, or is it a little green? Is it sweet and juicy, or taste like sour grapes? Is the last fruit you produced so old it's turned into raisins? If God were to take your fruit and make wine, would it be deserving of a cork or a screw-top? Are our lives producing fruit that others can see?

Of course, the irony of this passage is that to grow fruit, a vine must be pruned, must be cut back, must be trimmed of the frivolous stuff to focus on the fruit. That's the toughest part of the passage, because no one likes the thought of being pruned. And yet, Jesus tells us that by being pruned we are made more fruitful.

What does it mean to be pruned? We have to be careful here, because it would be easy to trivialize suffering and blame God. "You lost your job? You lost your friend? God is just pruning you for better service." I don't believe in a God who prunes us that way. But I do believe in a God who speaks to us through our conscience and through others to help us identify where we are fruitful and where we are just being flowery. The ultimate goal of pruning is to bring us closer to God and to cut away the things that are keeping that from happening. For me, that means pruning my pride. My pride is cut back by long lines, traffic jams, answering machines, road construction, and anything else that keeps life from going the way I want it to go. During those times I can grumble and complain and turn into a crab apple tree, or I can use that time to reconnect with the True Vine that gives me life and work on producing peace and patience.

Pruning can be a painful experience. But I think we can choose to look at many situations in our life as a chance to become more fruitful. When bad things happen, we

tend to say things like, “Look for the silver lining” or “God has a plan for you” or “Take that lemon and make lemonade!” But those are more than empty words, you know. They point to a choice we can make about how we view such things in our lives, even the little things. What if we saw a long line as a chance to practice being more patient? Or a traffic jam as a time to talk with God? What if we saw an answering machine as a chance to rethink the words we were about to say? Or a delayed flight as a chance to get to know a stranger and make a friend? Or, more seriously, what if we saw an illness or surgery as a chance to take our health more seriously, to treat our bodies better, to reconcile relationships that have produced only weeds and thorns? How would our perspectives and our faith change if we chose to look at these situations as an opportunity to be cut back a little so that we could bear more fruit down the road?

Faith is an ever-changing thing. If yours is anything like mine, it doesn’t grow in the same way all the time. Sometimes it grows straight, but sometimes it gets a little loopy and crooked. Every so often I need to prune out old habits or thoughts or attitudes or behaviors so that, through the power of the true vine, even more fruit will be produced in my life.

Are you the same person you were last year at this time? Of course not. Each year we grow and change based on our bodies and our age and things that happen around us. And our faith is impacted by those things as well. Your faith won’t be quite the same next year as it is now. Things will happen, little things and big things, which will change it. Some things will be steps forward, some will be steps back. But everything that happens in life gives us an opportunity to fulfill Jesus’ words: “This is to my Father’s glory; that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” I may be going out on a limb here, but I think that’s why we are here: to bear fruit to God’s glory.